

# **“Right Thinking”**

Genesis 22:1-18 & Romans 12:1-2  
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How does one discover God’s will? Abraham and Sarah are praised for their faith, for the renewing of their minds, for their evolving perception of God’s will. Abraham and Sarah often went through a progression of misunderstanding God’s will, transferring their misconceptions on God and blaming God as many people do. What makes Abraham and Sarah distinctive is they kept listening for God, were open to new ways of thinking, and continually changed their lives and renewed their minds. Abraham and Sarah were on a vision quest for right thinking.

Every stimulus we receive is colored, framed, translated, and construed by an array of factors such as our experience, mood, expectations, peer pressure, education, religion, emotions, etc. Everything we perceive is filtered and adapted that is why people who experience the exact same event all have a different perception. Our memory is malleable. When we do not understand something, we tend to make assumptions. We are unable to completely and accurately communicate our thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Many people are uncomfortable wrestling with questions, admitting that they do not know, so they fabricate answers. We tend to perceive what we want to perceive. We project and transfer our perceptions on others and on God. When things do not go well, we tend to blame either our self, others, or God or a combination. Our journey of understanding is often messy with plenty of missteps and backward steps. Usually, we see more clearly looking at experiences in the past than in the moment. Often, it is challenging to tell the difference between one’s ego and the Holy Spirit. All of this makes it extremely challenging to perceive God’s will.

A sermon is merely one person’s perception of God’s will for a particular group of people at that moment in time. A good sermon sparks critical thinking, taking listeners on a journey renewing their mind to a fuller perception of God’s will. A sermon takes place in worship where we all ask the Holy Spirit to interpret everything to our specific situation. Numerous times someone has told me that they received a specific insight from a sermon. Sometimes I am surprised, because I didn’t know that insight was in the sermon. I go back and reread the sermon and do not find that insight. I believe that is the Holy Spirit. Sometimes the best sermons are the one’s you disagree with, because they help you formulate your perception of God’s will. Grand and complex insights often require stories to clarify their message. Often, we portray ourselves and our heroes in a positive light in our stories.

Before we dive into a controversial scripture with a wide array of interpretations. Remember this is my interpretation today. I had a different interpretation in the past and will have different interpretations in the future. It is merely a partial, evolving perception.

**Genesis 22:1-18 NLT “Some time later, God tested Abraham’s faith. “Abraham!” God called. “Yes,” he replied. “Here I am.” “Take your son, your only son—yes, Isaac, whom you love so much—and go to the land of Moriah. Go and sacrifice him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains, which I will show you.” The next morning Abraham got up early. He saddled his donkey and took two of his servants with him, along with his son, Isaac. Then he chopped wood for a fire for a burnt offering and set out for the place God had told him about. On the third day of their journey, Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. “Stay here with the donkey,” Abraham told the servants. “The boy and I will travel a little farther. We will worship there, and then we will come right back.” So Abraham placed the wood for the burnt offering on Isaac’s shoulders, while he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them walked on together, Isaac turned to Abraham and said, “Father?” “Yes, my son?” Abraham replied. “We have the fire and the wood,” the boy said, “but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?” “God will provide a sheep for the burnt offering, my son,” Abraham answered. And they both walked on together. When they arrived at the place where God had told him to go, Abraham built an altar and arranged the wood on it. Then he tied his son, Isaac, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. And**

**Abraham picked up the knife to kill his son as a sacrifice. At that moment the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!” “Yes,” Abraham replied. “Here I am!” “Don’t lay a hand on the boy!” the angel said. “Do not hurt him in any way, for now I know that you truly fear God. You have not withheld from me even your son, your only son.” Then Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught by its horns in a thicket. So he took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering in place of his son.**

**Abraham named the place Yahweh-Yireh (which means “the Lord will provide”). To this day, people still use that name as a proverb: “On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided.” Then the angel of the Lord called again to Abraham from heaven. “This is what the Lord says: Because you have obeyed me and have not withheld even your son, your only son, I swear by my own name that I will certainly bless you. I will multiply your descendants beyond number, like the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will conquer the cities of their enemies. And through your descendants all the nations of the earth will be blessed—all because you have obeyed me.”**

Context, context, context is critical when searching for God’s will in scripture. Is your interpretation consistent with themes of the Bible? Is it a progression to a more loving way of living and being? Does your interpretation fill you with a sense of peace?

Most Hebrew words have a range of meanings determined by context. The Hebrew word Abraham interpreted as “burnt offering” also means “ascend,” “bring up,” or “living offering”. Most Jewish scholars interpret that God asked Abraham to “bring up” Isaac and dedicate him and his descendants as a living offering. The idea here is that this was to be a vision quest, a God focusing journey up the mountain upon which Isaac would be dedicated as a living offering, receiving God’s blessing and blessing all people. This fits well with the covenant that God made with Abraham and Sarah that their descendants through Isaac’s will be as numerous as the stars, that his lineage will bless all people. It also fits well with the recurring theme of living offering throughout the Bible. Samuel’s mom presented her child as a living offering at the temple declaring “Now I am giving Samuel to the Lord and he will belong to the Lord his whole life long.” The prophet Amos declared God’s word as, “I hate all your show and pretense—the hypocrisy of your religious festivals and solemn assemblies. I will not accept your burnt offerings and grain offerings. I won’t even notice all your choice peace offerings. Away with your noisy hymns of praise! I will not listen to the music of your harps. Instead, I want to see a mighty flood of justice, an endless river of righteous living.” God was changing, transforming, renewing people’s thinking to a more loving way.

Our God is pure love, grace and joy. It is highly unlikely that God was testing Abraham or was asking Abraham to kill Isaac. None of that fits with a loving, gracious, joyful God. The context was a time when human killing and sacrifice was the norm. It was an era when people thought that if you were a person of faith, then you will sacrifice to God your first born. Abraham’s view that faithfulness involves killing your first child, changed, was transformed, renewed to a new belief that God desires for all parents to love and care for their children. It seems absurd today, but this was a radical transformation in Abraham’s day. Although sadly there are still parents today who physical and emotionally hurt and kill their children. So, we have still not fully embraced the change to a world where all parents love their children.

How did this change in perception of God’s will happen for Abraham by an angel, a dream, worshipping, prayer, passionate debates with Sarah, a premonition, a growing love for Isaac? Did the change happen in a day or over the years of Isaac’s life? I don’t know and for me it doesn’t matter. The important transformation is for humanity to move away from killing their children to loving their children. If we were Moses, who likely wrote this scripture, at that time the way to emphasis that this change was coming from God was to have an angel proclaim it. If you are upholding Abraham as a person of faith the story is more effective if you say God tested Abraham rather than Abraham initially totally misunderstood God’s will. Abraham has a history of misunderstanding God’s will. Abraham raped Hagar to get a son. In that era, it was common practice to rape slaves for offspring. God’s desire was to move humanity from rape to loving marriage, from domination of women to a love union, from inequality to equality. The Old Testament is full of people misunderstanding God then changing to a new way of thinking such as from getting physical revenge, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, to forgiveness, from conquer and murder the inhabitants of the land to care for and provide for all people, from animal sacrifice to caring for animals, from slavery to freedom for all, the concept of jubilee which meant every seven years debt was forgiven, and wealth inequality was rebalanced to equality. There is a monumental progression in the understanding of God’s will from the beginning to the end of the Old Testament. Perhaps

humanity is only able to expand our love so much each generation. I wonder how God will expand our love in the future.

My perception is that Abraham and Sarah's faith is great, and a model for us, because it was constantly searching, questioning, changing, renewing, transforming and growing. They were on a journey of expanding love. They were able to let go of previous interpretation of God's will and perceive God's invitation to move to more loving ways. When they failed, they sought to learn from their situation and try again. They were humble, they never thought they had all the answers, or completely knew God's will. Over and over Abraham and Sarah listened for God. They, like all of us, were only able to perceive snippets which they strived to implement. Abraham, Sarah and Isaac strived to live as a living offering of love, constant pursuing right thinking, so they could receive God's blessings and bless all people.

The Apostle Paul wrote. **Romans 12:1-2 NLT** "And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all God has done for you. Let them be a living and holy offering—the kind God will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship God. Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect." **Romans 12:2 NRSV** "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

The Bible is a tool to enable you to renew your mind, to become more loving, more joyful, more gracious. The Bible becomes an idol when you use it to control others. Be careful in going to the Bible to support a certain way that you think.

Anthony of Sourozh wrote, "You choose your life, that is to say, you choose all the conditions of your life, when you choose the thoughts upon which you allow your mind to dwell." The psalmist advises to meditate on God's word, strive for right thinking, and you will be like a vibrant, fruit bearing tree. The Apostle Paul wrote, "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

Many times, we discover God's will and right thinking through our stories, fairy tales, movies, and books. Often stories wrestle with the moral themes of life revealing new ways to love. Stories reveal different scenarios. If we live a certain way, how will that change us and impact others. What is our purpose? What do we do with our power and resources? How do we relate to others, God, and ourselves? Sometimes a story will have a hero and a villain contrasting two ways of living. Sometimes there is a lot of grey and it is unclear to who is the most loving and what is the most loving way, so the story gives us a glimpse of one way our actions may shape our future. People around the world and from the beginning of time have told stories of heroes who fight monsters or some evil force to usher in a time of peace, love, and prosperity, so as the fairy tale ends, they can live happily ever after. Our supreme superhero is Jesus. Jesus has conquered every form of evil and death and will transform each and every person and the entire cosmos to glorious, joyful, loving, harmonious, eternal life. Jesus is inviting you to change, transform, renew to bring more love into the cosmos.

Scripture proclaims, **Romans 12:1-2 MSG** "So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for God. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what God wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you." Amen

